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ABSTRACT

This performance guide is designed for teachers to use with students before and after a performance of "A Village Fable, In the Suicide Mountains," A one-act musical play based on the novella "In The Suicide Mountains" by John Gardner, and presented by The Coterie Theatre. The guide, called a "Cuesheet," contains seven activity sheets for use in class, addressing: (1) A Village Fable (offering a story synopsis, introducing important characters, and offering activities that examine different ways to say lines from the play); (2) Ways of the Stage (looking at theatre conventions, production problems, and the role of the audience); (3) About Adaptations (looking at the challenges of adapting a story into a play script); and (4) Superstition on Stage (discussing both ancient and current superstitions, and listing resources for people who "hurt too much"). (SR)

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"A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains": A One-Act Musical Play Based on the Novella "In the Suicide Mountains" by John Gardner, Book by James Still. Cue Sheet for Students.

by Virginia Stuart Dopp

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Cue sheet
FOR STUDENTS

Welcome to *Cuesheet*, a performance guide published by the Education Department of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. This *Cuesheet* is for you to use before and after seeing a performance of *A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains*.

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A Village Fable
In the Suicide Mountains

A one-act musical play based on the novella "In The Suicide Mountains" by John Gardner
Book by James Still • Music by Michael Keck
Presented by The Coterie Theatre

The Kennedy Center

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A Village Fable

The Play: Story, Lines, and Lyrics

This synopsis of *A Village Fable, In the Suicide Mountains* includes lines of dialogue *(printed in italics)* and chants or lyrics (printed in handwriting). **Characters' names are in bold print.** As you read the synopsis, try different ways to speak the lines with expression. Practice out loud with a partner. During the performance, listen carefully for how the actors say the lines and chant or sing the lyrics. What do the lines tell you about the characters? How do the lyrics add to your understanding of the story?

fable—A short story using people or animals to illustrate a moral (a saying or lesson about life)

cannibal—one who feeds on human flesh

superstitious—blindly accepting beliefs that are not based on knowledge or reason

In ancient times, people believed goats were evil—either the devil himself or someone associated with him. Dwarves supposedly made magical weapons.

The setting is the imaginary Village in the Valley Where the River Ran Dry, which is surrounded by mountains called "Suicide Mountains." The **villagers** live in fear of a giant cannibal, the mysterious **Six-Fingered Man.** He has made their river dry up, so there is no water. The villagers can't defeat the Six-Fingered Man, so they look for someone else to blame for their misfortunes. They become superstitious, developing "rules" and picking on anyone who doesn't follow them—anyone who is at all different.

The Villagers torment **Chudu** (CHOO-dew), who is half hunchbacked dwarf, half goat. Although Chudu wants to do good and be happy, the villagers avoid him and think that he is evil. They admit that he isn't responsible for their lack of water, but they blame him for everything else. Parents warn their children:

Don't touch Chudu!
Never look him in the eye!
If you touch him, you will die!

The more Chudu tries to be nice, the more the villagers reject him. He sings:

What's the use?
Why do I try?
Looking deeper, deep inside...
I want to die.

Living in the same village are a **father, mother,** and their daughter **Armida** (ar-MEE-da).

The people in the Village thought
Armida's family was—a bit strange.
Sometimes they build giant bonfires
and dance
barefoot
until the sun comes up!

The villagers fear these different people who dance and sing like "gypsies" in the moonlight, behaving too freely and happily. Armida leaps and sings that she can "taste" the moon:

It tastes like being strong
It tastes like breaking free
It tastes like being loved
It tastes like family
But most of all: it tastes like me!

Armida is strong, independent, and smart, but her life changes when her mother dies and her father remarries. Her **stepmother** teaches her to appear stupid, to flirt, and to flatter men. Although, unlike her stepsister **Clarella,** Armida has many admirers, she isn't being true to herself:

I've changed every part
But I can't change my heart.
If i'm not me...i'd rather die...

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The **King** of the village also cannot defeat the Six-Fingered Man, so he pins his hopes on his son, **Prince Christopher.** The Prince is a musician who plays the violin beautifully, but his father wants him to be a warrior:

Starting tomorrow there will be no music! None! From sunup to sundown, all of your days will be spent learning to be a man.

The King sings:

He'll slay dragons, ride horses,
win battles in war!
He'll love politics, government,
power and more!

When his father sends him off to the Suicide Mountains to kill the Six-Fingered Man, Prince Christopher cries out:

I am not you!
Do you want me to die?

Life seems so hopeless that Chudu, Armida, and Prince Christopher run away into the mountains, each planning to jump from a cliff.

What do you think happens when they meet on the road up Suicide Mountain? Find out when you attend the play.

Try This Before the Performance

Chant the villagers' words as they taunt Chudu. Emphasize different words each time you repeat their lines. For example:

"DON'T touch Chudu. Don't TOUCH Chudu. Don't touch CHUDU."

Next, try chanting these same lines three ways: angrily, fearfully, snobbishly. How does your interpretation of the lines affect their meaning? During the performance, listen for how the actors emphasize words and interpret lines.

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Ways of the Stage

Theater Conventions

People who make movies use camera angles, stunt people, special effects, computer graphics, and other devices to make the movie's story seem real. People who stage plays cannot use such devices. Instead, they use theater conventions, practices that audiences accept in an agreement to "suspend disbelief" (to pretend that the play's action is real and is happening for the first time). Watch for these theater conventions in *A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains.*

- Because this is a musical play, performers sing individually and together. The audience accepts the idea that these people often break into song. The songs and music help tell the story by giving information, expressing the characters' inner thoughts, moving the action forward, and creating mood.
- Some props or parts of the set are imaginary. (Watch Armida peek through an invisible keyhole.)
- Puppets may be used to represent characters.
- Some actors play more than one character. In the theater, this is called "doubling."
- Actors who play villagers, storytellers, suitors, and royal advisors also function as narrators. They tell the story while participating in the action on stage. In doing so, they are like the choruses used in ancient Greek dramas. Greek choruses chanted lines, narrated the story, reacted to events through words and movement, and commented to both audience and actors.

Production Problems

Before the Performance

People who work together on plays (playwrights, director, actors, designers) often must solve problems to present a story on the stage. Below are some problems that had to be solved for *A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains.* How would you solve them? Remember that you can use different stage areas, music, sound effects, voices, lights, costumes, scenery, furniture, and props (objects that actors handle). (Hint: The theater conventions listed previously may help you solve these problems.)

Problem 1: The director wants the play to be "timeless"–a story that could occur today or that might have taken place long ago. How might you make a play look, sound, and feel "timeless?"

Problem 2: The play's action occurs in the following settings: the village marketplace and streets, Armida's home, under a bridge, at a grave site, on a mountain road, and on a cliff. How can you show quick changes in settings?

Problem 3: A villager says that while dancing, "Armida reached up and grabbed the handle of the Big Dipper, swinging from star to star until she grabbed the full moon." How might you show this action on the stage?

Problem 4: How can you make the Six-Fingered Man seem twice the size of the other actors?

After the Performance

How were the problems solved in the play that you attended? How did your solutions compare?

The Role of the Audience

Because many people work together to create a play, theater is called a collaborative art. The actors, director, and playwright are just some of the theatrical collaborators who created *A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains.* Other collaborators include the designers, stage crew, stage manager, and **you!**

The audience is the final collaborator in creating theater. Before the audience arrives, there is no performance; there is only rehearsal. A play needs an audience, so be ready for your role:

When you arrive, follow an usher to your seat.

When the theater lights ("house lights") dim, listen and watch carefully. Talking disturbs the performers and other audience members.

Laugh when something is funny! You may even cry when something is sad.

And of course, please clap at the end of the performance, as the performers bow.

After the bows, stay seated until the house lights come on.

About Adaptations

The play, *A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains*, is an adaptation of the novella, or short novel, *In the Suicide Mountains* by John Gardner. Adaptation means "change." People who write plays are called playwrights. To adapt books for stage performances, playwrights must decide:

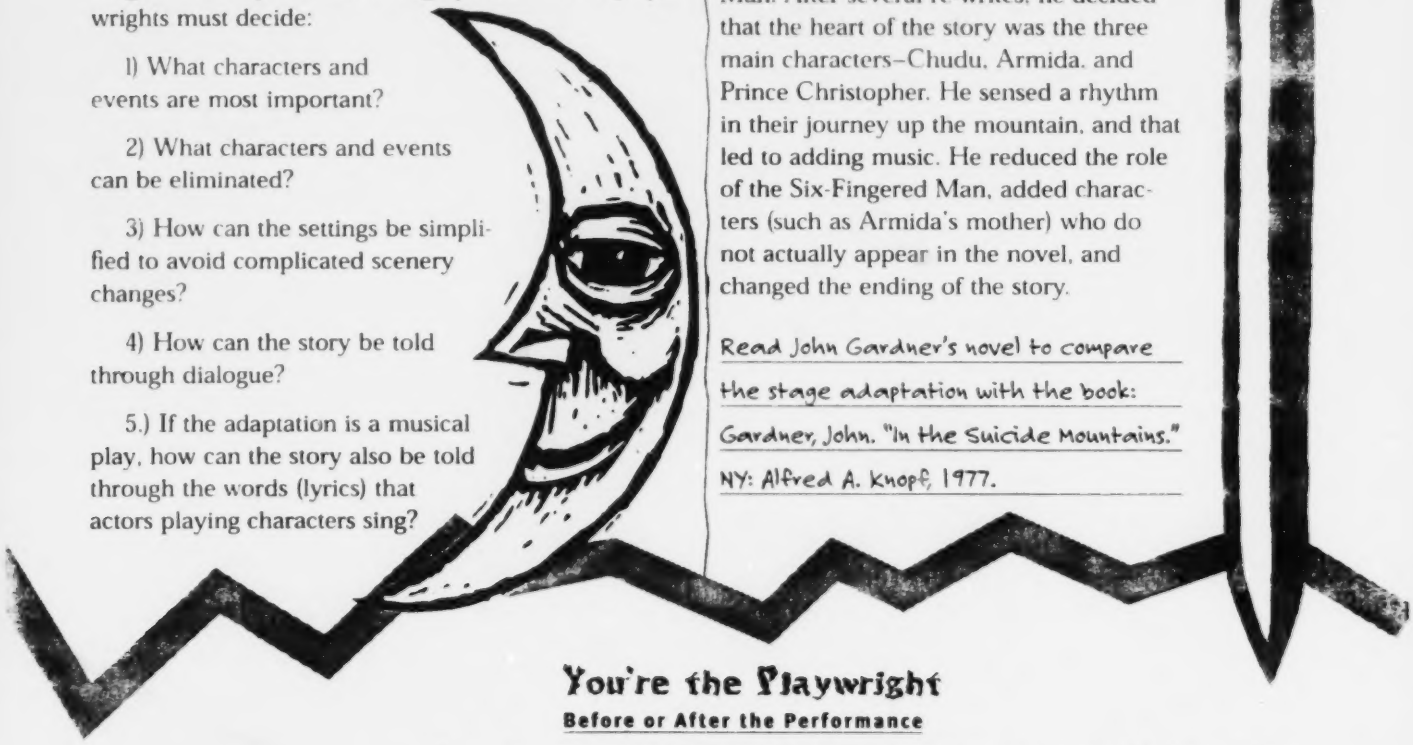
1) What characters and events are most important?

2) What characters and events can be eliminated?

3) How can the settings be simplified to avoid complicated scenery changes?

4) How can the story be told through dialogue?

5.) If the adaptation is a musical play, how can the story also be told through the words (lyrics) that actors playing characters sing?



Adapting In the Suicide Mountains

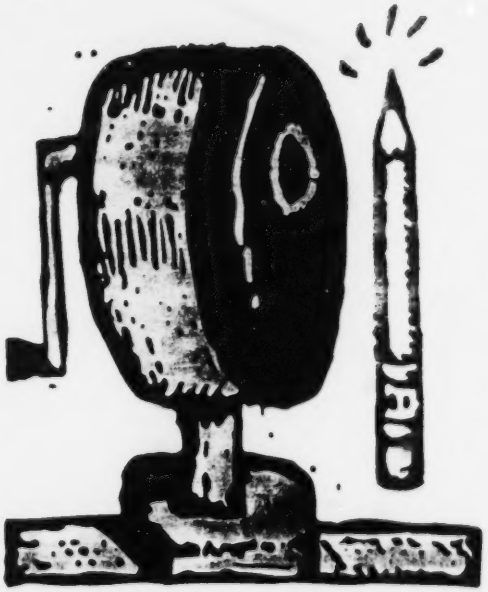
Playwright James Still first tried writing a script that focused on the Six-Fingered Man. After several re-writes, he decided that the heart of the story was the three main characters–Chudu, Armida, and Prince Christopher. He sensed a rhythm in their journey up the mountain, and that led to adding music. He reduced the role of the Six-Fingered Man, added characters (such as Armida's mother) who do not actually appear in the novel, and changed the ending of the story.

Read John Gardner's novel to compare the stage adaptation with the book:

Gardner, John. "In the Suicide Mountains." NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.

You're the Playwright

Before or After the Performance



Try your hand at script writing! The scene described below appears in the novel, but not in the play:

Chudu meets Armida on the road up Suicide Mountain. He grabs her to prevent her from jumping off a cliff. As they struggle, Prince Christopher, dressed in full armor, gallops up the road on his horse. Although he is not good at riding or fighting, he tries to behave like a knight and rescue Armida.

1. Using the next page (and additional pages as needed), adapt the action described above into a play script. Use a pencil so that you can make revisions. Your script must identify the characters and the lines that they speak.

2. Your dialogue (lines) must tell the story. (Do not rely too much on stage directions that tell actors to perform actions without speaking words!)

Your Adaptation

A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains

Use additional pages, if needed.

After you have finished your adaptation... Discuss the challenges of adapting part of a story into a script. What was difficult? How long did it take to create the script? Share your script with other "playwrights" who tried this activity. Compare your dialogue choices with theirs. Is your script ready to act out?

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Superstition on Stage

A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains "feels" like an ancient story with its monsters and mysterious Suicide Mountains, but its characters' problems are also modern. People are often afraid of things they cannot control, so many still put faith in superstitions and good luck charms. Early in the play, the villagers voice their superstitions:

"Always stir the batter in the same direction." (Ancient people believed that this would put them into harmony with nature.)

"Combing your hair after dark makes you lose your memory!" (People once believed that this would also bring bad luck to sailors.)

"Rats will leave you alone...if you write them a letter." (In the first century, people actually did this!)

During this performance, superstitions grow, becoming more and more ridiculous. Listen to the dialogue and lyrics and look at the set for other examples. Discuss superstitions that people still hold today.

The Villagers in this play want everyone to follow their superstitious "rules." Anyone who stands out by being different might bring bad luck and is treated cruelly. They sing: "a nail sticking up will be hit, back, down."

The characters Armida, Chudu, and Prince Christopher all ask for "One teeny tiny person to see my pain, feel my pain, know my pain."

Even today, some people still make anyone who is "different" feel isolated. Fortunately, there are many resources for people who hurt too much:

Talk to people: parents, teachers, counselors.

Contact hotlines: in DC: 202/223-2255; Northern VA (serves the entire metropolitan area): 703/527-4077; MD: 301/864-7161 or 301/864-7130

Read books:

Colman, Warren. *Teen Suicide*. Chicago: Children's Press, 1990.

Lester, David. *The Cruelest Death: The Enigma of Adolescent Suicide*. Philadelphia: The Charles Press, 1993.

Shamoo, Tonia and Philip Patros. *I Want to Kill Myself*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990.

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